Steve Cropper

Out Of The Shadows

The session guitarist, house guitarist, producer, songwriting collaborator and influential creative force of Stax Records, Cropper's worked with many of R&B's luminaries.

by Danny McCue

As a producer, session guitarist and songwriting collaborator with the likes of Eddie Floyd, Wilson Pickett and Otis Redding, Steve Cropper helped to shape, coax and find focus for the inspiration of just about every major recording that was issued by the Stax Recording Company between 1962 and 1971.

Those original recordings, now becoming available again through Fantasy Records, provide only a clue to the remarkably creative collaborative effort that went into making a large number of those sides classics.

"Gee Whiz," "Soul Man," "The Dock Of The Bay," "Knock On Wood," "I Forgot To Be Your Lover" — each song is rich in associations, each a legacy to an era when a small 'mom and pop' outfit could turn the pop market place on its ear.

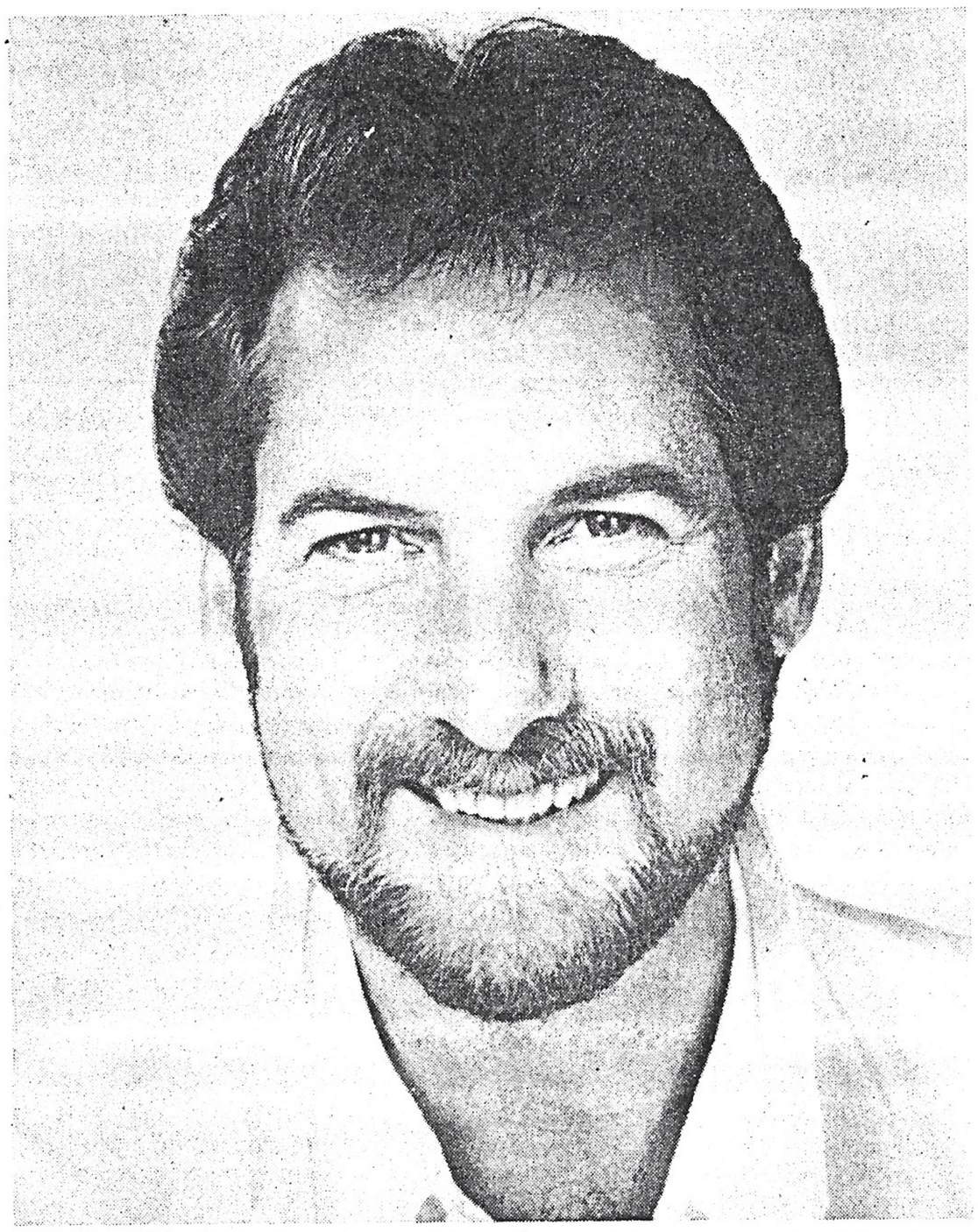
As a member of Booker T. and The MGs — whose original lineup also included Booker T. Jones on keyboards, Al Jackson on drums and Lewis Steinberg on bass (Duck Dunn replaced Steinberg in 1964) — Cropper found himself in a situation where a record label's whole sound was coalesing around this loose group of studio musicians that he helped bring together.

The band's trademark sound was a well played funk riff over which Cropper would add his lean rhythm guitar and economic fills, a style flashy in its sparse simplicity. But the MG's influence was more than purely musical; the very idea of a permanent house band that could provide whatever was needed whenever it was called for seeped into the collective consciousness, in the process becoming the prototype for all the loose, hip and dangerous bands to follow.

The creation of a brother and sister (Jim Stewart and Estelle Axton hence the 'ST' and 'AX'), the label's reputation grew in proportion to the continuous flow of product and the steady stream of quality talent that made its way to their door.

In 1964, Otis Redding came to town — legend has it, only as the driver for another performer who had an audition — and promptly recorded "These Arms Of Mine." Hearing the records that Redding was producing, Wilson Pickett went to his producer, Jerry Wexler, and said that that was the direction he wanted to take. Wexler, who had forged the distribution deal between his label (Atlantic) and Stax, sent his volatile charge to Memphis.

By this time, the late spring of 1965, Cropper exercised de facto control of the studio. In preparation for Pickett's session, Cropper listened to the singer's latest Atlantic release, **Saturday Night At The Uptown**, *and was struck by a phrase Wilson Pickett kept repeating on the fade of a song called "I'm Gonna Cry."*



On May 12th, 1965, after a brief writing session with Steve Cropper the night before, Pickett joined the MGs in the studio and recorded "In The Midnight Hour." It became his first #1 hit.

With Otis Redding, the collaborative relationship had more time to develop into a true friendship and a true songwriting partnership. The match of a studio perfectionist and a performer of Redding's inventiveness and drive yielded Stax many of its most memorable singles: "Try A Little Tenderness," "I've Been Loving You Too Long," "Respect" and "(Sittin' On) The Dock Of The Bay."

After leaving Stax, Steve Cropper went on to produce albums for the Temptations, Joe Cocker, Tower Of Power, Jeff Beck and John Cougar Mellencamp. He recorded a number of solo albums, and late in 1979 became a founding member of the Blues Brothers Band. Since then, he's been off the road infrequently, often performing with one form of the Blues Brothers or another, and sometimes with Jimmy Buffet.

Our conversation took place two days after he had gotten home from Los Angeles, where he had been doing session work for a soundtrack. Prior to that, he was on tour in Australia. The morning after we spoke he flew to Canada for a series of televison appearances. Steve Cropper is still a very busy man.

THE MUSIC PAPER: *Do you think you have a trademark style or signature riff?*

STEVE CROPPER: I don't know. I think I'm probably identified as a player because of all the records I've played on, but I don't know. I'm accused of having a certain style, basically because of the simplicity and the fact that I leave a lot of holes and stuff. I make room for singers, somehow, and musicians sort of think that's a unique thing to do.

A lot of guys get on a session and they want to play every note they've ever learned *[laughs]*, while in the back of their minds they still want to be good session players. You're not a good session player playing every note you've ever learned. You have to learn when to play and when not to play. I think that one of the golden rules of being a good session player is: It's not what you play but what you don't play that counts. Learning to leave the secret holes.

TMP: *When you walk into a session do you find yourself having to adapt to the rest of the band or to the singer?*

CROPPER: I think it's more adapting to the singer. It's not that I play particularly different, one singer to the other, but I definitely try to mold myself to the surroundings, to what's going on. On a country session, obviously I play a little country; on a jazz session I'll play more jazz. You just sort of adapt somewhat to the singer. But in terms of playing behind Otis Redding or playing behind Rod Stewart, I play basically a little of the same licks.

TMP: *I know at Stax there were a lot of different groups of songwriters. Did you find that certain writers made you modify your style as a guitarist?*

CROPPER: Well, yeah, there were a lot of different writers, and I think I would have to say that in certain instances I was a little bit limited because I didn't start doing sessions completely knowing how to play the guitar. I learned on the job and I had enough chops to keep me going; everybody seemed to like it. I was in demand all over town — as was Duck Dunn and a lot of the other players — until we got so busy at Stax that we just turned into the band that worked there exclusively. There were writers who came through there that had certain specifics as to what they wanted, but they usually walked away fairly satisfied. I mean, when you get someone like Booker T., who was so forceful, it was just incredible; he could do anything. Whatever it was, whatever it took, it still came out the Stax sound.

TMP: *What was the physical setup of the studio like?*

CROPPER: Well, if you can visualize a movie theater that had two aisles and you pulled all the seats out of it, you'd have a pretty good idea of what the actual space was. Then you cut it into thirds by drawing a line down the middle, about two-thirds of the way down. You use the third that's left for storage and in the right third you put carpeting and you put up a wall and a big curtain to separate the space and that became the studio, more or less. I think the measurements of the space were 17 by 23 or 24 feet and two-thirds of the stage that faced this space was used as the control room. The old movie theatre speakers were used as our playback monitors. The other third was used as the satellite record store.

In the actual room itself, about fifteen feet into it, there was a piano, and then behind that was a drum riser. On the other side is where Duck and I would be located and, y'know, the funny thing was the placement of the microphones. On the old Stax records, on some of the first ones to come out in stereo, the left mix was on one side and the right was on the other. Nothing was in the center and all of the echo was coming back on one side and the vocalist was coming out. . .well, suffice to say that it was a very strange setup. We really didn't deal with it until about 1965.

TMP: *Are you one of those people that says that mono sound was better?*

CROPPER: No. *[Laughs]* No way. I love dynamics and I love being able to hear the full range of sound. I don't hate monoral sound — a lot of those earlier records. . .I mean, the groups were fantastic, you can't top them. But you can't get around the fact that they were limited to a degree by the technology that we had available. If we could get those same guys back with us in a really good technical studio, there's no telling what we'd be able to do.

Another thing is, I think some of the rawness and some of the simplicity was camouflaged and covered up because of the limitations of recording in mono. What you got out of it was the lead singer, with his lyrics and his half of the performance, and you got the band and you heard that performance and every now and then you could hear a stand-out lick; in other words, there was this big 60 cycle vocal on the bottom and everything else was sort of crowded at the top, sort of like having a stew and looking

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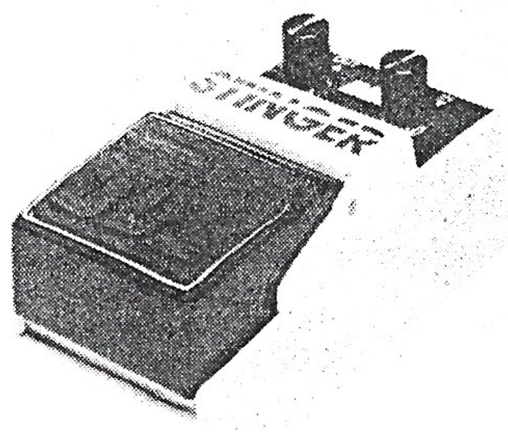
PRODUCT REVIEW

BBE 601 Stinger

by Jack Newhouse

BBE, the company that created the innovative Model 401 Sonic Maximizer, has now put out a simplified version of that circuit in a foot pedal format known as the BBE Model 601 Stinger.

The Stinger can be used by guitarists, bassists and synth players. It uses BBE's unique harmonic phase compensation with user-controlled high-frequency boost to achieve its unusual presence and brilliance. It is, in fact, quite an asset to any performance arsenal because it delivers so much definition, clarity and punch in a compact, portable unit conveniently designed to fit into any of several multi-pedal carrying cases.



BBE's Model 601 Stinger.

I tested it with an electric guitar. I first tried it with just guitar and amp, without other effects, so that I could get familiar with the Stinger and experience exactly what it is capable of doing. I must say that it enhanced my sound so noticeably that I did not enjoy my sound nearly as much after I turned it off. The 601 really enriched my lows while making my highs jump from the speakers. Hearing this once makes it easy to understand how it can also greatly benefit bass and synth sounds.

Next I tried the Stinger with other effects, namely digital reverb and a tube-style overdrive unit. The brilliance that it added in this setting was unmistakable and irresistible. With it, an instrument signal can not only maintain but increase its character, so as not to get lost or muddied by other effects. This is important with effects such as digital reverb, echo and overdrive.

As always, BBE has put in the time and effort to understand the needs of musicians, and then develop a unit which not only satisfies a particular need but also does it with style. Whether you are a performer or are in the pro audio field, you can depend on this company to deliver.

As far as the BBE Model 601 Stinger goes, I suggest you try it. But be warned: You may never perform without it again.

STEVE CROPPER

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for where the meat is.

While we're talking about the actual Stax sound, I think that you've got to credit the whole thing to Al Jackson. A definite artist within himself, he was the driving nucleus of that whole thing and he knew. . .he knew dance tempos, he knew groove. He could listen to a piece of music and go, 'It needs this.' *[Laughs]* I mean, a song could be written one way and within fifteen minutes he'd have it completely turned around in another direction and he'd be right; that's just the way he was.

TMP: *Do you think that over the years you developed that knack?*

CROPPER: Well, I hope I did. After being exposed to something for so long you sort of pick up certain habits and a lot of times I think those habits actually allowed us to save some people's songs. Songwriters would come in with a definite idea of how they wanted a particular song and we would begin to work it with their intentions in mind, nobody was ever denied their creative input; it would be like, "OK, what have you got?" "Here it is." "OK, here are the changes." And we would beat it to death until we finally said, "Guys, give us five minutes."

So we'd sit down, Al and I, sometimes some of the other guys, and say, "Ok, where are we going with this thing?" We'd sit there and start a groove going and then when we were ready we'd call the guys back in and we'd say, "OK, let's try this." And it usually happened pretty quickly after that.

We did that a lot. I would say that 90% of the hits were all head arranged. There were no charts; nobody had everything written out. Otis always came in with horn ideas, and I think that rubbed off on me, too. I got to where I would write a song and the same night I'd be coming up with horn ideas. Maybe not million dollar riffs but something that the guys could take from there.

TMP: *Tell me about some of your collaborations. For example, what was it like to work with Otis Redding?*

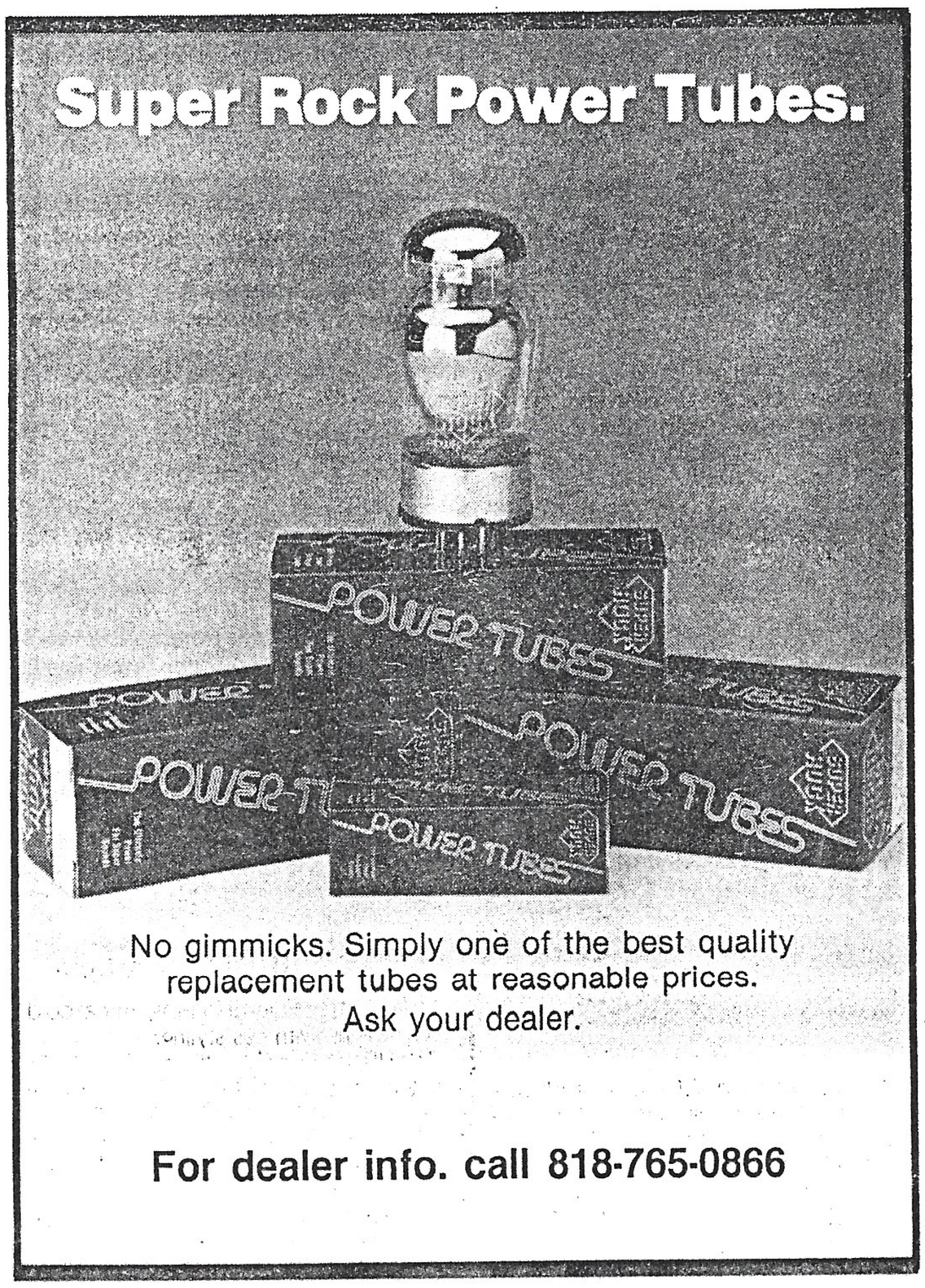
CROPPER: Well, Otis always came in with ideas and we'd sit down and start to jam. I'd play him things I was working on and he'd play me some of his ideas and we'd use whatever fit.

TMP: *I recently saw a photo of Otis playing you a song he had written in the studio, and I found the image of him with a guitar in his hands very striking.*

CROPPER: Oh, he was always doing that. And y'know, I've got pictures of when we were on tour in Europe and he always had a guitar in his hand; I mean, he never stopped. He'd get on the bus and the guitar would come out. If we were on the bus for six hours, he would play for six hours. Y'know, he plays the guitar on "Sweet Soul Music," the Arthur Conley record. He produced it and is playing guitar on it. He also played his guitar on "Dock Of The Bay."

TMP: *Are there any performers you wished you worked with but just never got the opportunity?*

CROPPER: Well, probably Aretha Franklin's at the top of the list. Tina Turner. . .It's a hard thing to say. I was on a session one time and Stevie Wonder was recording "Superstition" in the same building. He's a genius and I'd love to work with him. Marvin Gaye would've been heaven to work with. I mean, I had so many great ones, I don't feel left out. I've worked with Tom Dowd and people like Rod Stewart, Richard Perry, Otis Redding — who was probably, as far as I'm concerned, the greatest singer who ever lived. And I worked with people like Eddie Floyd, Carla Thomas, Sam and Dave, Johnnie Taylor. . .some of the best; so I've had a lot of fun at it.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LES PAUL

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track or multitrack — all those techniques which are now considered standard techniques — they were looked upon as trickery or gimmicks by the first people who heard them. The way I looked at it was, "Geez, I'd like to do that or do this, but there's nothing out there to do it with." So I'd invent it. The only reason I made it was because it wasn't there. Edison made the lightbulb, I guess, because he got tired of the candle flickering. *My* reason for developing the things I've developed was just because I needed them. I just finished designing new strings that are. . .oh, just leaps and bounds ahead of the strings that are out there now, and it was just a question of my getting sick and tired of playing with bad strings. So I put everything aside and took a couple of months to make a string that was right.

The electric bass, that wasn't in existence until I brought it about, and the only reason that happened was because my bass player quit. I didn't have a bass player and Mary says, "What are we going to do?" I said, "I don't know yet, but I'll know when it's time."

TMP: *If a kid came up to you today and asked what attributes he would need to be a great guitarist, what would you tell him?*

PAUL: Well, I'd tell him, "Before you beat your head against the wall, make sure that God gave you all the necessary things." You might want 'em but you can't buy them at Sam Ash. You better have a good ear, which means perfect pitch or damn close to it. Second, you can't buy rhythm; it's a God-given talent, if you believe in God, otherwise it's just a gift. Then you better have the ability to create, because once you have the guitar and the songs that you are going to do, you've got to be able to create some things. You should have a great ability to do that.

You must have the [desire] to put the time in when another guy is having a ball with some chick or something; you've got to be very energetic and dedicated.

There's several more, but one that is very important is mixing; after you have all the techniques, you have to take all these notes and put them in the right places. Buddy Rich and I used to talk about that all the time. We knew that the most important thing is what you do with what you got.

Another great gift is the ability to recognize what the public wants. Most people get carried away with trying to impress other musicians, which I don't try to do at all; I'm not there to do that, I'm there to play what the majority of all the people came to hear. That's terribly important because if anybody says, "Look, I'm a musician, not an entertainer," he's a fool. You are entertaining, and it's terribly important that you get that message across with your hands, through your instrument. A lot of people just run off a lot of notes, but if you get a girl in the front row and when you play a song, you make her cry, you're getting to them.

Lastly, you've got to remember, you only learn if you're looking; otherwise you can be with someone for ten years and you just get dumber.